

Statement by Chief Rabbi Dr Israel Brodie, 5 May 1964

Nevertheless, in the case of Dr. L. Jacobs, I did give a reason for my decision in my letter to the Secretary of the United Synagogue. I indicated that it was with the deepest possible regret that I was compelled owing to the views of Dr. Jacobs - expressed publicly both by written and spoken word - to state that I could not grant my certificate. My decision dated the 23rd January, 1964, has sparked off a new controversy: a conflict which regrettably and irresponsibly certain elements have brought before the wider community through the Press and the Radio, no doubt in the belief that in this way pressure could be brought to bear on me and the Honorary Officers of the United Synagogue. In these circumstances, it is desirable to give a brief account and an explanation of recent events.

During the three months that have elapsed since my decision, it has been possible to assess its implications. Irrelevant arguments and facile theories have been propounded which have tended to conceal the real issues. With these issues I shall deal presently, but there is one point which I would like to clarify as it has been referred to by some members of the community. They ask how it is that I allowed Dr. Jacobs to hold the position of Minister to the New West End Synagogue from 1954 to 1959, and also agreed to his appointment as Tutor and Lecturer at Jews' College, notwithstanding views he had expressed which were not in keeping with orthodox belief. A number of times during his ministry at the New West End Synagogue, I felt obliged to speak to Dr. Jacobs regarding his views which he had expressed on particular occasions which were inappropriate for a Rabbi. Nevertheless, I have described my support of Dr. Jacobs during this earlier period as "an act of faith". I considered, as many did at the time, that Dr. Jacobs was possessed of ability and potentialities. I felt that here was a promising man passing through a phase of intellectual and spiritual struggle and that it would be wrong to reject him before he had reached a fixed position, and his views had become crystallised. That I did have misgivings in respect of the appointment of Dr. Jacobs at Jews' College is shown by my decision not to allow him to lecture on Bible studies - the subject on which Dr. Jacobs was going astray. I wished to be helpful, and as I said in an interview in July 1962:

I deeply regret that my hopes for Dr. Jacobs have not been realised. Subsequent utterances indeed have shown, particularly in his lecture, *The Sanction of the Mitzvoth*, delivered in 1963 (and since published) that Dr. Jacobs has travelled far from the accepted norms of Judaism. Moreover, it is now possible to obtain a clearer picture of the position and to see how basic and fundamental are the considerations which compelled me to make my decision.

The Torah, including the written and oral law, is the very basis of Jewish existence. Once undermined, as our historical experience has proved, Jewish life and tradition weakens and withers, and the way is open for the disappearance of the Jewish identity through mixed marriage and other forms of assimilation. Those who are appointed Rabbis and teachers of communities must by their very vocations and by the terms of their ordination as Rabbis be the exponents of the Revelation of God's word embodied in the Torah, written and oral, with the sanction and authority attached thereto. That is what I would expect of Dr. Jacobs who has been ordained as a Rabbi after the traditional manner, when ministering to a congregation under my jurisdiction. But Dr. Jacobs repeats the well-worn thesis that parts of the Torah are not Divine but are man made, and maintains that reason alone should be the final judge as to what portion of the Torah may be selected as Divine. His views on this subject were presented in a pamphlet published by the Society for the Study of Jewish Theology, entitled, *The Sanction of the Mitzvoth*, to which reference has already been made. Dr. Jacobs states that:

... it is now seen that the Bible is not, as the mediaeval Jew thought it was, a book dictated by God, but a collection of books which grew gradually over the centuries and that it contains a human as well as a Divine element. This applies to the Pentateuch as well as to the rest of the Bible Those who are at all aware of what has been going on in the world of thought and scholarship know all this to be a common-place Indeed there would be no need to say it were it not that the Chief Rabbi and the London Beth Din are saying the opposite and trying to put the clock back.

If this were all that Dr. Jacobs teaches and preaches, it would be incongruous for him to occupy the pulpit of an orthodox synagogue. Moreover, from his most recent written and verbal statements on Judaism, which in the main are a repetition of the arguments of earlier reformers, and especially leftist conservatives, it will readily be understood why I found myself unable to authorise his appointment as minister of the New West End Synagogue. Even a cursory examination of these views reveals how incompatible they are with the most fundamental principles of Judaism, and how they inevitably lead to a critical attitude to the observance of the Mitzvot themselves, as evidenced by the claim of Dr. Jacobs that:

... In modern times the Jew no longer asks, "Why did God tell us to keep certain Mitzvot?", but, "Did God tell us to keep certain Mitzvot?"

An attitude to the Torah such as this which denies its Divine source and unity (Torah min Hashamayim) is directly opposed to orthodox Jewish teaching, and no person holding such views can expect to obtain the approval of the orthodox Ecclesiastical authority.

Regrettably, everything points to the fact that Dr. Jacobs has been used as a central figure by a few resolute individuals who have openly declared their intention of trying to bring about a new orientation in our community. As the spiritual leader of Anglo-Jewry, I know that the new trend is in conflict with basic Jewish belief and inimical to the spirit and sentiment in which our community has developed over the years. Clearly, in the face of this denial of traditional Jewish beliefs and the threat to the integrity of Anglo-Jewry, I have felt it my sacred duty to do everything in my power to strengthen the Jewish faith and to uphold and enhance our Anglo-Jewish tradition.

The problem which confronts us today prompts me to refer to a striking passage in a Paper delivered by Dr. Isidore Epstein, of blessed memory, the late lamented Principal of Jews' College, and a scholar of world renown, who, in his customary clear and incisive style, discusses:

... the kind of Halachah which has begun to make its appearance of late in certain quarters which do not recognise the Divine origin of the Bible. By favourite tricks they play with the Bible, which they regard as partly Divine and partly human, it being left to individual judgment to disentangle the Divine elements from the human, they rob life's pilgrimage of the sole reliable signpost pointing the way wherein sojourners must walk "when turning to the right and when turning to the left", and thus render life pathless. In other words, by rejecting the absolute authority of the Bible, without being able to replace it by anything else, they encourage the most reckless individualism in religion, an individualism full of contradictions and vagaries, leading as often away from God as it does to God. Thus we come to the real divergence which, for the want of any other name we may call the Orthodox Halachah from any other kind of Halachah such as that emanating from the Conservative no less than Reform schools-the question of authority. The difference of attitude with regard to authority goes further than the mere difference in matters of ritual, practice and so forth. The fatal and inherent weakness of those who deny the Divine origin of the Bible, even if their personal religious behaviour conforms to the highest standard, lies in the lack of any valid objective authority for what they teach or affirm. Apart from private judgment and individual opinion, they have no objective criterion or authority for what they tell people to do or believe: thus depriving their Halachic pronouncements of all validity. Nor can any Halachah not founded on the acceptance of the Divine origin of the Bible enjoy permanence. For by making individual judgment the final arbiter as to which of the precepts and teachings of the Torah are Divine and which are human, everything, even fundamental beliefs, become an open question to be determined from time to time by outward conditions-physical and social-and by the variable philosophies or spirit of the age. (*The Place of Halachah in Jewish Life and Thought, Conference of European Rabbis-Paris, 1961*)

In conclusion, I would like to say how gratified I am by the attitude of the lay leaders of the community, the President and the Honorary Officers and the Council of the United Synagogue, who have loyally upheld my authority. I am greatly encouraged by the presence of so many Rabbis and Ministers here this afternoon. I am sure that you will be interested to know that during my recent visit to Israel I took the opportunity of discussing this problem with notable religious leaders of the Holy Land, all of whom endorsed and commended the attitude I have adopted.